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ABSTRACT

During the 1990s, the status of women faculty in higher education was the subject of numerous progress reports. Given the abundance of data available in these reports and articles on women faculty at colleges and universities, a study explored the issues, using another method of investigation--narratives. Six accomplished "resilient" women in the communication discipline, all full college or university professors, were identified and asked to share one or two stories that described critical milestones or markers illustrative of how they survived, if not thrived, in their careers. Themes running through these accounts which can be identified include the necessity of being far above average in competence, discipline, effort, energy, confidence, savvy, rectitude, creativity, and fortitude to survive in academia. Several of the women were afforded the support of a male mentor, and several reported skills in political and organizational power. All of the women hewed unconventional career paths mostly using convention. Resilience perhaps should be defined not only as strength of character--many of the women reported having to recover and rebound from devastating setbacks. (CR)

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RESILIENT OLDER ACADEMIC WOMEN: STORIES TOLD IN THEIR OWN VOICES

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During the 1990s the status of women faculty in higher education was the subject of numerous progress reports. For example, "Two Decades of Gains for Female Faculty?" (Bentley, 1992), "Academic Women: Twenty-Four Years of Progress?" (Stecklein, 1986) and "Twenty Years Later: Is There Parity for Academic Women?" (Billard, 1994). The titles of these representative reports all end with a question mark, and for good reason. Although each details much about women and academia: doctoral degrees, hiring, faculty integration, equal opportunities, academic rank, promotion, faculty publishing, discrimination, salaries, stereotypes, to name a few, the findings show that gains have been modest at best, and that overall the patterns have not changed (Sandier, 1992). Bentley's (1992) conclusion that "equal status, especially with regard to rank and tenure, eludes female faculty" is echoed by the other investigators.

Given the abundance of data available in these and other reports and articles on women faculty at colleges and universities, we sought to explore the issues using another method of investigation--narratives. Our goal was to gather the stories of women who succeeded in academia. In the telling of their stories, we believed the statistical portrait would become more animated and intimate. Finally, the narratives might well point a path to the future.

We identified six accomplished "resilient" women in the communication discipline, all full professors at US colleges or universities. The label "resilient" should not imply derogation but rather pioneers in academia. These women entered a male dominated world and journeyed to the highest academic rank. We asked these resilient women to share one or two stories that describe critical milestones or markers illustrative of how they survived if not thrived in their careers. We also asked them advice they might give to women in academia.

We now turn to a description of the stories and highlights, followed by our analysis identifying recurrent themes.

#1 Stories

In my first position, assistant professor on a tenure track, I was fortunate to have a mentor--a male mentor. He was head of the division, prominent in the university, and respected. He got me on committees, took me to meetings, introduced me to others, and provided advice on teaching and research. He really worked to get me connected, although there were no other women in the department. I think because of his mentoring AND my ability and work, I was successful. I did leave that institution for another position, but was offered competitive salary, etc. to stay. Really personal/family reasons motivated my decision to leave. I think this first experience is significant, in that, it was positive; I became a valued member of a department and university.

#2 Stories

a) First, twenty five years ago I was "taken in" by an unconventional feminist male president of a new liberal arts college. It was a job tailor-made for me as his executive assistant with faculty rank, not teaching. I moved to the faculty soon thereafter. That job offer was a gift, a totally unexpected opportunity. It was based on my recent experience as an administrator at a think tank. With my experience in education and public relations, I had been looking at an opportunity elsewhere. There, as we discussed my credentials, background and goals, they mentioned this new university opening. I interviewed with the President of this new university, and on the spot he offered me the job I mentioned. There was no documentation, no start date, but I was certainly in on the ground floor. It was the "right place for me."

b) Later I was turned down for promotion to full professor because I "had not published in the major journals in my field." I was notified by form letter; I was devastated. I had won awards, merit increases, adhered to the standard time line. It taught me that there is no conscience in institutions, no honesty you can rely on, not to depend on an institution to get validation of your goodness or competence, even if you "work your butt off,"-- no matter how much overtime, etc. I did not appeal the decision, yet I was not willing to give in. It propelled me out of defiance to publish-- ["I will show you."] I published immediately and enough to get promoted the next year. But I raised holy hell too, criticizing the administration for poor management. Then I began

to prioritize, balance, decided to move to three-quarter time to be free to do my own work. Overall, "the right thing happened for the wrong reason." I increased my life projects outside of the college.

#3 Stories

I really recall my move to administration, and my first position. It began as a mentor relationship with my male superior and evolved into a peer/colleague relationship. He could talk to me, trusted me to keep information, issues, frustrations, etc. confidential. He shared a great deal with me and from that I learned a great deal about content and process, thereby acquiring a large knowledge base which I think is my consistent key to success.

#4 Stories

a) Early on, having worked in mostly small liberal arts colleges, following my spouse's career moves, I found it interesting that the first was no monumental incident but a series of "little happenings"--sitting in enough meetings over time to learn that I was different, being the only woman, thinking "this is crazy or stupid" and no one agreeing or reinforcing my world view. I was isolated. I wondered "am I crazy?" but I learned I had better adapt/adopt male style and world view to survive. But as I saw the results of all that, that I might have been right on some things, I grew in confidence. I began to think "they don't get it." It didn't really dawn on me at any one moment though, it sank in over a long time. In addition I observed that men get the breaks in all kinds of ways that women are peripheral.

b) My mid-life crisis deal: I had had it; I left academia (a tenured job) without another job lined up. That's scary. I did some consulting for a year and then took a job running a career development center. I discovered I had a knack for this. Asking odd ball questions, I could match people up with appropriate careers pretty well. It was actually a teaching job too, but without having to evaluate. But the work and the clients focused on the <u>how</u> of things, and I missed exploring the <u>why</u>, so on a lark I decided to do some exploratory higher education interviewing. On my first "practice interview" I found the job much more interesting than it had appeared in the job description. I heard nothing for several weeks, then was offered that job, when apparently

their first choice person backed out. I am still there, having served in several capacities: faculty member, chair, dean, and associate vice-president.

#5 Stories

My early years were marked by a tremendous sense of segregation, isolation. There were no interactions beyond the occasional exchanges of customary greetings. Meetings seemed to involve the chair talking with another member of the department, that was the extent of discussion. Most of the faculty did not collaborate on research; one read their work only after publication.

#6 Stories

a) I was a tenured, associate professor. Once on a committee, a major University-wide committee, the chair of the committee went around the conference table introducing the members. 'This is Dr. _____, from, this is Dr. _____, from, etc. I was the only woman faculty member on the committee. When the chair came to me, he ignored the "Dr." and used only my first and last name. Before he went on to the next person, I corrected him with, "my title is Dr." At every subsequent meeting, he would emphasize the "Dr." when addressing me.

b) I think a pivotal factor for me was having a mentor. My dissertation advisor was also chair of the department. During my first years "out" we keep in close contact. He helped me identify possible positions, right out of graduate school, wrote and called others on my behalf, and urged me to write and submit particular parts of my dissertation.

#1 Advice

Never admit you don't know, you WILL figure it out; you probably know more than others. Don't be intimidated. Act confidently.

#2 Advice

Protect your work day and week, set boundaries of others' demands on your time. Follow your intellectual interests of the heart in research, publication, whatever. Use tools of your choice to stay healthy, to maintain energy, creativity and handle stress: exercise, nutrition, hobby, etc.; use spiritual practice to keep you centered. Practice gratitude--list why you stay.

#3 Advice

Learn the culture, be observant, figure out the politics. It's important to follow through, tie-up loose ends. Learn to prioritize work--teaching, research, service.

#4 Advice

My advice is quite simple--make your own job. Do what you want and be clever enough to do so within whatever job description you accept. I have had several different jobs, each one I created in my own fashion by "ignoring the rules". The other advice I would give is don't be frantic to get ahead. Work for balance, step back, don't take everything at work seriously.

#5 Advice

Avoid becoming isolated, if there's no immediate support in the institution, link-up with others in the area. Act relatively immediately on a concern or grievance, first get advice and reactions from your support system, then express your concerns. Waiting will not help, and many times makes the situation worse; it is difficult to go back to the initial event or issue once it has passed.

#6 Advice

Do as men do--make sure others know of your successes, such as articles accepted. Men are good at advertising with colleagues, learn that skill. They play one-up-man-ship well; it's important not to sit back and watch. Don't hesitate to work your success into the conversation. Also, it's critical to have a mentor, a mentor who is well-placed and respected.

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THEMES

Identification of themes running through these accounts is fairly straightforward, offering few surprises. Although the women recognize their own competence and hard work, many acknowledge they needed much more, and more than their male counterparts.

R. M. Kanter's list of remedies for structural barriers include: improving proportions, creating opportunity, and building power bases (1977). The increase in numbers of women college faculty has recently resulted in a critical one-third proportion Kanter contends tips the balance of power. Now women faculty should be taken more seriously because they finally comprise a group, not just tokens.

Our informants covered opportunity in several ways--opportunities to be published, advancing in one's field by leaving it or moving temporarily from faculty to administration, connecting with colleagues across campus and at conferences.

Most of these opportunities also increase women's power bases. Kanter details how critical are diverse overt and covert power bases. Overt power bases are increasing in the form of mentors, moves into administration, using grievance systems, higher rank designations, prestigious publication. Covert bases increase in learning campus politics, informal networks and sponsors, gaining prestigious committee assignments, expecting respectful treatment, and engaging in self promotion activities.

Sandler (1992) also organized the themes of women's faculty status around structural barriers (nature of the university work culture, organizational policies, tenure) similar to Kanter's. But she added and distinguished psychological and sociological categories. Under psychological she categorized 1) lack of skills and traits for competition, and 2) burden on the women rather than the institution. Our informants addressed both issues through their points on self-promotion, confronting grievances, and the unquestioned assumption of hard work and discrimination.

Among the sociological issues Sandler detailed are discrimination and stereotyping. Our informants reported both alive and well and living in their academic departments and universities, mostly in promotion obstacles, double standards, and episodes of denigration.

Several women in our small sample were afforded the support of a male mentor. Several reported skills required in political and organizational power: knowing about explicit and implicit university process, especially in promotion and tenure; learning how to promote themselves, and how to get themselves promoted in rank. They needed to confront that getting promoted required more than being ultra-competent. They confronted a reality that judged them not only on standards of competence. Supreme competence in their work would not necessarily bring success, unless accompanied by competence in organizational politics, in knowing one's place, in subtly challenging the system while outwardly exhibiting gratitude for one's place in it.

These women hewed unconventional career paths mostly using convention. Resilience perhaps should be defined not only as strength of character of pioneers--to be able to assimilate, to strive, and to succeed in a system that is inhospitable and hostile. In the process, many learned how to overcome feeling different, and the isolation that accompanies it by locating other women and alliances to deal with feelings of isolation, alienation, being discounted, lacking confidence. They "knew their places" yet demanded rightful places, negotiating the tight rope of visibility and invisibility. Simultaneously, they conformed to a system and challenged it.

When abused by the system or colleagues, they needed to respond. They had to protest differential expectations, challenge limits and predisposition of low expectations of women even though they nothing but soaring expectations for themselves. Many report having to recover and rebound from unfair devastating setbacks. And rebound they did, either by leaving the position, the field for a while, or exceeding expectations so well as to make themselves unassailable. In doing so, they left a legacy of exceptional performance. As elsewhere, the truism still holds for women faculty that "the real indication of equality will be when a mediocre woman obtains the same rank, salary, and opportunities as a mediocre man."

Perhaps truly resilient women are like those in our sample who in the process were not co-opted, who somehow retained their identities as different, and who hope for a less conventional world for the women who follow them.

The advice of these resilient women grows directly from their experience. It is also entirely consistent with extant literature on career progression of women faculty. Two samples follow. Advice given by two business professors (Burnaby & Missiriam, 1990) includes learning the system and how to make it work for you, yet understand that intelligence, energy and ambition are only the basics. In addition, one needs a steady flow of publications, working on several projects simultaneously, networking on campus and beyond, welcoming but not expecting a mentor, taking risks, being creative, gaining confidence, doing your own public relations, and accepting that discrimination exists but not wasting time and energy moaning about it.

Sandler's (1992) recommendations were also echoed by our resilient academic women. She suggested: be active and energetic on your our behalf, develop a strategy now that will guide your progress for the next five years as scholar, teacher and colleague, seek information and assistance in revising your plan, and keep careful records of your activities. Our resilient women reinforce most of the above, augmenting the list with learning organizational politics, confronting discrimination, and interestingly, keeping perspective. They recommend keeping perspective through a sense of humor, making priorities, balancing work with other dimensions of life, and having outside interests.

CONCLUSION

For now, to survive if not thrive in academia, one still needs to be far above average in competence, discipline, effort, energy, confidence, savvy, rectitude, creativity, and fortitude, in other words, resilient. We began by highlighting several studies on the status of women faculty. These reports and the stories we gathered strongly suggest that things will get worse or remain difficult before they get better. Even though women are now approximately one third of the faculty

work force, that is just over the cusp in Kanter's power balance terms. So we know what the near future looks like, it looks much like the past.

Beyond the year 2000, we may benefit from changes in the system such as: ongoing, formal mentorship programs, as well as more women, not just in force of sheer numbers, but in positions of power. As the scrutiny of higher education increases, the traditional male structures and functions of higher education will certainly be challenged and perhaps altered or transformed. Access and accountability may increase for both males and females, and women may become a standard rather than a protected class.

But these women have forever changed the system. They have identified and documented "the system" for those who followed. These successful women had no path or guide to success in their careers. Yet they, and the stories they share, have done so much more than point a path for us; they have sign posted it and published guidebooks of the path from which all of us who followed, profited.

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